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ABSTRACT

To work well together, school boards and superintendents must reach agreement in certain sensitive areas of their relations. Five of these, briefly discussed, are (1) the degree to which administrators become involved in policymaking, and boards, in procedural issues; (2) the superintendent's authority over administrative appointments; (3) board members' authority or influence as individuals; (4) contact between the board and subordinate administrators; and (5) the superintendent's role in mediating board disputes. (MCG)

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Remarks By

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HOW TO IMPROVE BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONS

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HOW TO IMPROVE BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONS

It is an honor to have been asked to serve as the Superintendent representative on a panel along with a School Board President and a very noted College Professor to discuss the topic "How to Improve Board-Superintendent Relations." I obviously cannot speak for all Superintendents but from discussions of this topic with my peers, I know I speak for at least some of them. It is a topic near and dear to me. It is a topic which must be of un-ending interest to each local Board and Superintendent.

In addressing this topic, one must be aware that to some extent the very size of a school district influences the nature of Board-Superintendent relations. My own administrative experience in which I had contact with school board members was for three years in a district of 4,000 pupils, for three and a half years in a district of 32,000 pupils, for four and a half years in a district of 96,000 pupils and for the past almost six years in a district which has, during that time, grown from 11,200 pupils to over 18,000 pupils. Only in this last district have I served as Superintendent. In the others, however, I worked sufficiently close to the Superintendent to observe Board-Superintendent relations. I have known personally and professionally over forty board members and attended well over two hundred school board meetings. It is from these experiences, these observations, that I will be making my comments on "How to Improve Board-Superintendent Relations."

It is my hope, through my remarks, to stimulate thought and generate some questions for later in the program. So let me begin.

First, I should like to comment on what I believe are the characteristics of good Board-Superintendent relations. I use the word "relations" to be virtually synonymous with "communications." Basically, the communications between Board and Superintendent must be open, honest and two-way. I am as concerned about the quality of the relations--communications--as about the quantity of it. Communications must be formal such as those that occur at regular and special board meetings, study sessions and through written communications and phone conversations. Communications must also be informal and occur when we meet at Parent-Teacher Organization functions, school dedications, attend conferences such as this one or gather socially.

In the brief time I have available today as a panel member, I would also like to suggest that unless certain "sensitive areas" of Board-Superintendent relations are openly discussed and dealt with, there is not a solid foundation for a good working relationship. I should like to mention five such "sensitive areas" and share with you my own opinions on each.

SENSITIVE AREA ONE - Whose job is it to do what as it relates to Policy and Procedure?

Typically, one hears that it is the Board's job to set policy and the Superintendent's job to develop procedures for their implementation and administration. I contend these are not and should not be exclusive domains. As a Superintendent, I believe I need to get into policy--to recommend changes and to recommend new policies. It is the Board's primary responsibility to adopt policy and it is a secondary responsibility of mine to assist in their development.

As a Superintendent, I believe a Board needs to get into procedure--to recommend changes and to recommend new procedures. It is my primary responsibility to develop procedure and it is a secondary responsibility of the Board to assist me. The Board will more often than not hear from the public they represent and serve on a procedural matter than on a policy matter. Procedures cannot help but become an element of Board-Superintendent relations.

The degree to which Boards and Superintendents overlap on the Policy and Procedure matter will vary from district to district. The issue must, however, be discussed by both parties with some agreement reached.

SENSITIVE AREA TWO - Who does what as far as personnel matters are concerned, especially administrative appointments?

I have a statement in my contract which reads that I have "complete freedom to transfer, promote and appoint" all district administrative and supervisory personnel. I requested this even though I know there is no such thing as "complete freedom." I realize that Board members again hear from the public regarding administrative staff in a district and have opinions when vacancies are to be filled and transfers made. I take these into account, but of all the decisions I influence in a district I guard most zealously this area of administrative transfer, promotion and appointment. I expect the Board to hold me very accountable for the quality of the overall administration of the district. I cannot be held very accountable if the Board second guesses my administrative personnel recommendations or, worse yet, overrides them. If repeated mistakes appear to have been made in transferring, promoting or appointing administrative staff, it is probably time for a new Superintendent.

The degree to which Boards and Superintendents overlap on the transfer, promotion or appointment of administrative staff will also vary from district to district. The issue must, however, be discussed by both parties and some agreement reached.

SENSITIVE AREA THREE - Is it completely true that Board members only have authority and influence when they act as a group in a regular or special meeting?

My answer to that question is in a strict legal sense "yes," but in a practical day-to-day sense "no." I believe it reasonable and necessary to receive requests from individual Board members. The requests may be for some particular information so as to respond to an inquiry the Board member received. I may be requested to personally meet with someone and to do this or that. I must use my discretion as to when to say to an individual Board member, "This should be taken to the whole Board. Either you can do it or I can do it." My own experience has been that Board members are sensitive to this issue and separate well matters of individual concern from those of the entire Board. A Superintendent can also help by having clear in his own mind which matters are which.

The degree to which Boards and Superintendents understand Board authority and influence as a group or as individuals will also vary from district to district. The issue must, however, be discussed by both parties and some agreement reached.

SENSITIVE AREA FOUR - Should there be or should there not be direct contact between the Board and sub-Superintendent administrators such as other central office administrators and building principals?

I personally believe that the contemporary superintendency in a system of any size is not a person but a team of administrators working together. I personally want and encourage direct contact, preferably face-to-face, between Board members and administrators. The better they know each other as people the better I can do my job as Superintendent in not only relating to the Board but also to the Administrative Team.

Board-Administrative staff contacts are desirable if understood by the Board, the Superintendent and the Administrative Staff. On the other hand, these contacts have great potential for harm if they are misunderstood or misused. If the Board's intention is to "go around" the Superintendent to the staff or visa versa, it is harmful to Board-Superintendent relations. Encouraging Board-Administrative Staff contact must be based on a high level of trust on the part of a Superintendent in both the Board and the Staff and his relationship with both groups.

The degree to which Boards and Superintendents encourage or discourage Board-Administrative Staff contact will vary from district to district. The issue must, however, be discussed by all three parties and some agreement reached.

SENSITIVE AREA FIVE - To what extent, if any, should a Superintendent concern himself about relationships among and between Board members?

There is only one Superintendent, but there are three or more members who comprise a school board. The degree to which these three or more Board members relate well to one another is of extreme interest and importance to the Superintendent. The Superintendent must, if the Board is divided, work with the whole Board. He must not fall a party to a request to "Listen to us. Do not listen to them" If a Board is divided, the Superintendent must work to get some common ground. The purpose of such efforts is not to eliminate debate or differences but to develop understanding. Wiser decisions often come from honest debate and real differences.

The degree to which the Board and Superintendent understand the Superintendent's role and objectives in working with a divided Board will vary from district to district. The issue must, however, be discussed by both parties--all parties--and some agreement reached.

CLOSING --

In closing, let me state that I believe good Board-Superintendent relations mean open, honest, two-way communications not only within the Board but between the Board as a group and as individuals with the Superintendent. I further suggest that unless some understanding is reached between a Board and a Superintendent on a number of "sensitive areas," there is not a foundation for good nor improved Board-Superintendent relations. These "sensitive areas" include:

1. Whose job is it to do what as relates to Policy and Procedure?

2. Who does what as far as personnel matters are concerned, especially administrative appointments?

3. Is it completely true that Board members only have authority and influence when they act as a group in a regular or special meeting?

4. Should there be or should there not be direct contact between the Board and sub-Superintendent administrators such as central office administrators and building principals? and

5. To what extent, if any, should a Superintendent concern himself about relationships among and between Board members?

Time did not permit a more thorough development of each area nor a citing of examples. I hope my comments did, in fact, stimulate some thought and questions.

I, for one, feel fortunate to be a Superintendent. It is an exciting and challenging job. I perhaps feel this way because the Board members with whom I have as Superintendent "related" are also people who find their jobs as Board members to be exciting and challenging. They have also been people who themselves are open, honest and trusting. They are people who believe life is good and worth living. These outlooks must, in turn, be the ultimate foundation of any good or improved Board-Superintendent relations.